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ABSTRACT

A discussion of national language policy and planning in the United States begins with a brief examination of the de facto policy currently at work and lack of government initiative in establishing and meeting priorities in language education. It then focuses on three policy issues currently facing the American foreign language teaching system. The first is the choice of which languages to offer, including specific concerns about introduction of less commonly taught languages and the federal government's strategy for investing in language education through legislation such as Title VI of the Higher Education Act. The second issue is the amount of language training needed and articulation among levels of instruction. This broad issue includes increasing the number of individuals exposed to language training, the length of training they receive, and transitions between stages of training, especially elementary-to-secondary and secondary-to-higher education. The third issue discussed is the need for consistent measures to assess student progress, provide information to improve instruction, and certify achievement and competency. Policy initiatives for each issue are examined. (MSE)

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Foreign Language Planning in the United States

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About the Author

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Foreign Language Planning in the United States

Richard D. Lambert
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The unpreparedness of American society to deal with other countries in their own languages will be an increasing handicap as we move into the next century. Even allowing for the patina of English currently used among elites in many parts of the world, our strong trend toward monolingualism will surely continue to hobble us as we expand our relationships in a world that not only has ceased to be bipolar but is becoming nonpolar. Our vital political and economic interests are drawing us to countries whose capacity to deal solely in English is very limited, and as we deepen our relationships with even old partners like Europe and Latin America and become internally more multilingual, the need for more and more Americans to deal firsthand in a variety of languages other than English can only increase.

Thus, our stake in expanding American competence in other languages is high. However, little concentrated attention is being paid to this issue. While other countries of the world, particularly those in Europe, are drawing up national plans to raise the foreign language competency of their citizens, language planning in the United States is very limited. Where it occurs at all, it tends to be dispersed through various levels of the educational system and to address one issue at a time.[1] The European countries—both individually, and collectively through such organizations as the Council of Europe and the European Community—are fully engaged in planning for the future in language education. We are not. Indeed, a substantial portion of the American foreign language community believes that foreign language planning is either an oxymoron or an odious heresy.

It is easy to understand the urgency of such foreign language planning in the context of the development of a transnational Europe. But even

without an immediate stimulus like that facing the Europeans, our own foreign language system is in desperate need of just such attention. As will be noted, many aspects of that system are dysfunctional, defeating the efforts of even the most gifted language teacher or student to produce high levels of language competency. The culprit is not pedagogical shortcomings, but rather structural flaws—architectural disabilities of the system that result in too few Americans even approaching, let alone retaining, a level of language competency that will enable them to use a foreign language. Yet the diffuse goals and totally disaggregated decision making in our foreign language educational system make it difficult to develop collective policies that might better serve our national priorities. It is the absence of such a national policy discussion in the United States that is most striking.

De Facto Public Policy

The lack of national planning with respect to foreign languages in the United States is particularly striking in that planning for general educational change is currently at the forefront of public attention. It is curious that foreign language education has not been included in the educational reform movement currently under way in many other curricular areas. It played only a minor role in the deliberations and recommendations for educational reform issued by the National Governors' Association; it was not discussed at the Education Summit; it is not part of the agenda for America 2000; it is not central to the effort to develop national assessment standards or to create a system for certifying master teachers, or any of the other current national efforts to change the design and functioning of our educational system.

In view of the national attention now being given to educational reform, one would expect to find a rich discussion taking place with respect to foreign language policy, one paralleling and interrelated with those taking place concerning mathematics, science, geography, history, and even the arts. However, the discussions taking place with respect to other areas of the curriculum have not yet touched foreign language instruction. To use an expression of Ernest Boyer's, "Foreign language is not even on the national screen." And yet our foreign language system is in desperate need of just such attention. The number of Americans with enough foreign language competence actually to utilize the language as adults is disappointingly small. The overall organization of the language

instructional system defeats the classroom efforts of even the most gifted teacher or student. And the lack of consensus on goals for foreign language teaching makes any reform difficult to achieve. If there ever were an area calling for fresh educational policy, foreign language is it.

This is not to suggest that there are no governmental efforts under way in the United States to change and improve the current foreign language system. At the federal level there are a number of funding programs dedicated either to supporting catalytic changes or to the long-term maintenance of aspects of the system—for instance, instruction in the non–Western European languages—that might otherwise not be adequately sustained. Moreover, several states, such as New York, California, Arizona, and South Carolina, have engaged in a major reexamination of their overall foreign language system policies. However, federal funding programs and state-level language policy initiatives are rarely based on a comprehensive plan, and they tend to concentrate on only a few aspects of the foreign language system: for instance, introducing non-Western language teaching into more schools, or raising requirements for the amount of foreign language study all high school students must undertake.

As a result of these piecemeal initiatives, the United States can be said to have a de facto public policy on foreign languages comprising the sum of the various individual governmental initiatives for change in the current system. In the case of the federal government, such initiatives are embodied in funding programs that underwrite catalytic projects. In contrast, state policy is not the sum of funding programs, but the sum of legislative and administrative fiats mandating structural changes in the school system. Indeed, one of the complaints about the introduction of new state foreign language policies is that they often require major changes in the current system without providing the increased funding necessary to carry those changes out.

Since education, including foreign language instruction, is one of the subjects reserved for state and local administration, the federal government's role in this domain is sharply circumscribed. It can play a largely exhortative role, calling for major structural changes, as it does now in its press for national assessment standards or for allowing parents to choose which school their children will attend. However, as noted above, foreign language education is not part of the discourse on such major structural changes. In the main, the federal government affects

educational practice, including foreign language education, through the appropriation of targeted supplemental funding. Sometimes the provision of federal moneys can play a major role in the organization of education. For instance, the federal programs providing need-based fellowships and guaranteed loans for college students cover a major portion of the tuition costs for students at both public and private colleges and universities. In the case of foreign language education, however, federal support programs have operated at the margin, providing funds for a very limited segment of the enterprise and for limited purposes.

Since the overall operation of the language education system is not a responsibility of the federal government, such funding programs must be piecemeal and targeted at particular domains or changes that Congress wishes to address. Each of these funding programs is embodied in its own legislation and administering agency. The federal agencies that deal with education tend to be divided by educational level; that is, elementary and secondary education are the responsibility of one set of agencies, higher education another. There is no established mechanism—and few occasions—for considering what these segmental initiatives are intended to add up to in addressing the overall needs of foreign language education. Nor is there any mechanism for assessing retrospectively either what the actual operation of the individual grant programs turned out to be, or what collective effect they had in introducing change. Hence, each program stands on its own and has its own special trajectory.

State- and local-level governments, on the other hand, set policy for and support the main corpus of the language education system. There is, of course, a large segment of the enterprise located in private colleges and universities, and they generally set their own policies. However, to the extent that there is public policy, most of it takes place at the state and local level. Hence, it is at this level that major shifts in policy must be effected if the foreign language system as a whole is to change.

In this short paper I can deal in an illustrative fashion with only three of the major policy issues currently facing the American foreign language system: (1) the broadening of language choice; (2) system coverage and architecture; and (3) the assessment of results.[2] I will try to indicate the interplay between an issue, the political level at which the planning takes place, some general processes that seem evident as planning evolves, and the varying catalytic strategies exemplified by the different policy initiatives.

Broadening the Choice of Languages

One of the major issues facing language policymakers in the United States, as elsewhere, is which languages should be offered and taken. This seemingly central policy issue is one that has received almost no direct attention. For one thing, in no part of the American foreign language system is decision making less deliberate and more dispersed than in the complement of languages offered and taken. In language choice, ours is a constrained free-market system. In theory, schools and teachers offer whatever languages they choose, and students opt to enroll or not to enroll in a particular language. The complement of school-learned language competencies is a product of that free-choice market. In fact, however, such choices are constrained by the dead hand of past decisions and by the nonfungibility of teacher competencies. Hence, student choices are in effect limited to Spanish, French, and German, which capture more than 95 percent of all enrollments at all levels.

It is not that there have been no swings over time in the relative importance of one or another language. Around the turn of the century Latin was the language with the highest enrollments. In subsequent decades there was a shift to German, then to French, and now to Spanish as the language with the highest number of students enrolled. Today German ranks third. The current ranking of languages is not entirely stable. While Spanish enrollments are increasing dramatically, German, French, and Italian remain stagnant. Japanese is rapidly gaining ground and has already overtaken Russian.

Language choice should be a policy issue, but it is not. To our knowledge no one has asked whether the current complement of languages offered and taken and the pool of adult skills that results are optimal for the United States. Nor is there even any systematic knowledge about why students take one or another language and what it would take to change the order of language enrollments.

A number of the European countries are facing the issue of language choice more directly. The Dutch, for instance, are choosing to concentrate almost all secondary school instruction on three languages: English, French, and German. All other languages are relegated to higher education or to specialized schools. Other countries are making similar decisions and have developed specific rationales for their choices. Choices in Europe are easier to make. There the most important criterion is the likelihood of

actual use in communication within the European context. English is always chosen as a world language, followed by one or more of the European languages. The basis of our choices may well be different from that in Europe, but at least there should be a rational argument about what an American complement of languages offered should look like and what the relative scale of enrollments should be—or for that matter what the criteria used in making those decisions should be.

Introducing the Less Commonly Taught Languages

While we have not developed an overall rationale for the appropriate mix of languages that should be offered and taken, in recent years a number of governmental initiatives and funding programs have concentrated on one aspect of language choice: the extension of our capacity to teach one or more of the non–Western European languages. What follows is a short examination of this issue and the federal- and state-level programs that have been introduced to address it.[3]

NDEA/HEA Title VI. One of the most durable goals of the federal government over the past forty years has been to shift the complement of languages offered in our formal education system. The oldest federal funding program dealing specifically with foreign language instruction is the National Defense Education Act (NDEA), later the Higher Education Act (HEA), Title VI.[4] The stimulus for the passage of that act was what was perceived as a foreign language crisis. A major and seemingly threatening event had occurred abroad, one that we would at least have known about ahead of time if we had had a greater capacity to understand foreign languages. Stung by the surprise of the Russians' launching of Sputnik, Congress was convinced that if more Americans knew the Russian language—and, by extension, languages of other countries outside Western Europe—we might be spared such intelligence shocks in the future.

The initial goal of NDEA Title VI was quite narrow: to produce a small cadre of advanced-level specialists who would serve as a national reservoir of expertise and teach other Americans about non–Western European countries. Following this narrow goal, the initial federal investment was channeled into graduate-level education, distributing money to campuses, to encourage them to establish teaching centers focusing on one or another non-Western world area, and through those centers to graduate students, to encourage them to invest time in becoming specialists on those

countries. Federal investment was at the margin, both in the fact that it concentrated on the graduate level while the bulk of the resources and personnel in the foreign language educational system is concentrated at the undergraduate and secondary school levels, and in the fact that the amount of money spent represented only a small fraction—over the years it has averaged about 10 percent—of the total costs of the programs being funded.

Over the years this relatively simple initial investment strategy followed one of the cardinal rules of federal funding programs: expand or die. In the first place, as is typical of many programs whose primary goal is linguistic, support of language development was combined with other international studies goals. From the outset, the development of linguistic competencies was tied to and later submerged by training in area studies—that is, the study of the social science and humanistic aspects of the countries where the language is spoken. Today, in those graduate-level language and area studies programs, only about 15 percent of the federal funds are spent on language instruction.

A wide variety of intervention styles was also added. In addition to funding for university-based centers and fellowships, NDEA Title VI adopted other investment strategies. Funds were provided for research and development—primarily the production of new teaching materials; overseas research by both faculty and students; summer school programs both here and abroad for students and teachers; overseas advanced language training centers; and national service centers to help in the development of language training more generally.

In addition to expanded investment strategies, more and more clienteles were added to the list of grantees. Over the years it became clear that the primary enrollees in foreign language instruction were students in the humanities and social sciences. Students concentrating in the natural sciences and in the applied and professional schools remained as monolingual as ever. Hence, receipt of federal funding in Title VI began to depend on the inclusion of one of these underrepresented groups. In particular, because of national concern about our future international competitiveness, there arose specific funding programs fostering language instruction for business majors. First, existing Title VI centers were required to establish links with their business schools; second, business students were to be given priority in awarding fellowships; third, a whole new set of awards was established to foster new business-oriented initia-

tives; and finally, a set of Centers for International Business Education were funded on nineteen university campuses, all of which were required to include language instruction in their curricula. It should be added that the representation of foreign language instruction in programs serving these new clienteles was extremely light. And even within the foreign language section of the program, a mix of client pressure and changed congressional intent broadened the coverage of Title VI beyond the non–Western European languages to include Spanish, French, and German, further diluting the initial intent of the legislation.

Title VI also illustrates another major dilemma in public policy formulation. To accomplish the catalytic goals of federal funding programs, a proactive rather than reactive investment is required—that is, directing funds to new areas and new clienteles to accomplish new purposes, rather than selecting the best from an applicant pool that basically represents the old constituency whose tendency is to do things the old way. The primary means of distributing funds under Title VI has been an annual or three-year open competition for grants. To the extent that there is a proactive role for the federal government, it is contained in the guidelines set for grant competitions and the ranking of proposals. The process of peer group review and the internal operating preferences of the administrative agencies can make the outcome somewhat different from the catalytic intent embodied in the original legislation.

The Secretary's Discretionary Fund. The expansionary imperative of Title VI was limited when it came to reside in a larger funding bill restricted to higher education. There were some attempts to extend the coverage to secondary schools by requiring the graduate-level centers to spend some of their funds on "outreach" to assist in the extension of language and area studies to that level. This was not enough. Believing that the secondary education system, like the university system, would broaden its language offerings only in response to a targeted federal investment, Congress attempted to broaden the language offerings at the high school and elementary school levels to include what were called "critical languages."

When repeated efforts to pass freestanding legislation failed, Congress included foreign languages as an allowable activity in a bill designed to improve the teaching of math and science at the elementary and secondary school levels. While a percentage of all Title II funds from the Education for Economic Security Act could be used for foreign language

teacher training activities, it was the Secretary's Discretionary Fund for Critical Foreign Languages that provided money for model foreign language programs at the elementary and secondary levels. This short-lived program was discontinued when Congress determined that Title II should be devoted exclusively to math and science education.

Five things are especially notable in this experiment. First, the mode of investment was again the open competition—sending out a notice that funds were available and selecting from among the best resulting applications. Second, the amount of money was marginal to the cost of the change, so that only small incremental changes were likely. Third, the proposed changes were aimed not at the margin, as in Title VI's original concern with graduate education, but at the mainstream—the secondary school level, where most of the existing language education takes place. Fourth, the government funded short-term innovations only, almost guaranteeing that changes would be written in sand, their effect disappearing as the small investment of external funds was withdrawn. And fifth, as Congress has moved to broaden the spectrum of foreign languages at the secondary and primary levels, it has also tried to reduce the number of languages covered. It may make sense to support less commonly taught languages like Twi, Oriya, or Quechua at the advanced graduate level. It makes less sense to do so at the high school level. Hence, the notion of "critical languages" was invented.

While the original intent of the bill was to focus on the languages most crucial to the nation's economic competitiveness, there was no consensus on what those languages were. During floor debate in the House of Representatives, one member of Congress noted that while Spanish might not need additional support, Arabic, Japanese, Russian, and Italian did, and those languages were critical to the nation's future. A second member noted, however, that Arabic and Russian were really not that important to the nation's economy, although Japanese and Chinese were. The legislation instructed the secretary of education to consult with the secretaries of defense, health and human services, and state and the director of the National Science Foundation to come up with a list of critical foreign languages. The result was a list of 156 different languages.

The Foreign Language Assistance Act. When foreign languages were removed from Title II of the Education for Economic Security Act, they were given their own program: the Foreign Language Assistance Act. Its mandate was to promote "improvement in the quantity and quality of

foreign language education offered in the Nation's elementary and secondary schools." The issue of "critical languages" was revived, not in authorizing legislation but in legislation appropriating funds for the program. Priority for funding was to be given to programs in the less commonly taught languages, with Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Russian being cited as examples. When preliminary program regulations were issued, only these languages, plus Korean, were eligible for funding. Following protests from state education officials and representatives of multilanguage organizations, funding priority was given to the five languages, with an additional five—French, German, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish—allowed if resources were unavailable in the first five.

What is most interesting about this legislation is the nature of the investment strategy. It follows the federal government's preference for recruiting other funds to its causes. It requires that grantees provide an even match of other moneys to whatever the federal government provides. However, except for the special linguistic focus and the concentration on secondary and primary education, the act is as nonproactive as it could be. Moreover, the decision making is essentially moved from the federal to the state and local levels. State agencies must apply for the money, and it is distributed as a block grant to a state on the basis of a population formula, although the federal government retains the right to reject a state application. The act continues the federal government's preference for open competitions and for model innovative programs, but it is the state that will make the choice. This is an interesting natural experiment in de facto policymaking in that it represents an extreme example of reactive investment strategies with funding dispersed to the state and local levels. It makes an interesting contrast to the initial intent of Title VI, which was supposed to be proactive and to retain decision making at the federal level.

Star Schools. In the next extension of congressional intent to broaden language choice, the legislation was aimed to extend instruction in foreign languages to clienteles who could not receive such instruction in the schools in which they were registered. Prominent in their minds were minority children enrolled in inner-city schools and students more generally in smaller rural schools that were unlikely to be able to afford programs to teach any foreign language, let alone non–Western European ones. To serve these clienteles, Congress provided funds to disperse such instruction through the use of distance learning technology. Under a program called the Star School system, very substantial federal funds were provided to a set of state consortia to give instruction primarily in Russian,

Japanese, and Chinese—although Spanish, French, German, and Latin are also offered—by means of televised distance learning networks. Foreign language education was only one of the subjects taught in the Star School system. Indeed, its primary focus was math and science. But it is worth noting that as an investment strategy it again operated at the margin of the foreign language instructional system, teaching only one or two years of very few languages to a few thousand students scattered throughout the country. Moreover, the decision-making process was located in consortia somewhere in between the federal and the state level.

It is remarkable that so much federal funding and attention has been given to the broadening of foreign language choice. In addition to the legislation described above, there are other funding programs, both governmental and private, dedicated to the same purpose. For instance, the National Endowment for the Humanities has a new funding initiative with a primary objective of broadening language choice by sponsoring the study of non-Western languages via curricula with a specifically humanistic approach. The proposed National Education Security Act promises to fund instruction in even the least commonly taught languages. Even foreign governments and American philanthropic foundations have joined in this effort to broaden language choice. The Japanese government is about to establish a heavily funded center to further the teaching of Japanese in American high schools, and to bring to the United States a large number of Japanese "youths" to help provide such instruction. At the state level in recent years there have been a number of new legislative initiatives encouraging the expansion of instruction in less commonly taught languages, particularly Japanese. Foundation grants such as those of the Carnegie Corporation, the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, and the Ford Foundation have supported the extension of instruction in the less commonly taught languages into high schools. A recent Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grant provided approximately $350,000 to each of twenty-five colleges, primarily to improve their offerings in the less commonly taught languages.

Viewed as a whole, the concentration of so much of our de facto national planning on broadening language choice and on expanding instruction in the less commonly taught languages is surprising, since such instruction comprises so small a proportion of all foreign language enrollments. Moreover, almost no attention is paid directly to the broader

question of how to arrive at a rational policy for language choice more generally. Nor do we seem to have a coherent policy even on broadening choice in the non-Western languages, nor has there been any systematic study of the cumulative effect of the various individual initiatives. Each effort seems to swim off on its own without any reference to what is being done elsewhere. Almost no attention has been paid to what has produced permanent change in language choice and what successful programs of instruction in the less commonly taught languages look like.

System Coverage and Articulation

Some of the major policy issues in any foreign language system are how many and what kinds of people should spend how much time studying foreign languages, and how to put the various parts of the system together to integrate them into a cumulative whole. In the American system, priority has been given to these issues in descending order. Trying to expand the number of people who receive some foreign language training has been given the highest priority. Somewhat less attention has been paid to how much training they should receive, and even less to how to integrate language education into the various levels of the system.

Participation rates. Although it is not usually described in this fashion, in recent years most of the attention and most of the foreign language advocacy rhetoric have been devoted to increasing the number of students who are enrolled in language classes. Currently, 38 percent of students take some foreign language courses while they are in high school. About two-thirds of those entering higher education have taken at least two years of language courses in high school, and about half of all students receive some foreign language training in college.

Attempts to raise that participation rate are generally tied to college or university admission or graduation standards for higher education. A national survey of higher education institutions in the United States found that in 1987, 22 percent of research universities, 13 percent of comprehensive universities, 11 percent of baccalaureate colleges, and only 1 percent of two-year colleges required prior study of a foreign language for admission.[5] As part of their requirements for graduation, 69 percent of four-year colleges and universities required some language training for some of their students. Requirements at the college level, however, are usually not binding on all students. Only 9 percent of research universities require all

students to take a foreign language course before they graduate, and only 22 percent of four-year colleges. Requirements tend to be specific to the major subject in which the students' concentrations lie. For instance, 90 percent of humanities majors and 73 percent of social science majors will be required to take foreign language courses by the time they graduate, but only 50 percent of natural science majors, 22 percent of business majors, and 8 percent of engineering majors.

Exposure to foreign language study at the college or university level is therefore spotty. Even allowing for some students enrolling in foreign language courses independent of requirements—and many of them do—only 48 percent of all students enrolled in four-year institutions take any foreign language courses before they graduate.

Length of training. In addition to the low proportion of students studying foreign language, the total amount of language study is typically low. Even where there are formal language requirements, the amount of study required can be quite small. One-third of the institutions with any language requirements at all insist on only one or two semesters of courses for the humanists, who tend to study languages more than students with other disciplinary foci. For the engineers, 60 percent of the requirements are for one year or less. I am aware of several institutions in which a one-year foreign language requirement can be met by taking one semester of one language and one semester of another.

The consequence of such minimal requirements is what can almost be called a natural law: in both high school and college, 50 percent of the students at each level drop out at the next level. The overall number of language courses college students actually take on the average is quite modest: 1.5 for all students, 2.0 for humanists, 0.8 for business students, and 0.3 for engineering students. It is difficult to imagine that such modest amounts of foreign language training can do more than introduce a student to a language.

Articulation of levels. One hallmark of American education is that the various levels of the system march to their own drummers. In most disciplines there is an inherent sequencing of topics and subfields that makes students' accumulation of subject matter and their transition across levels relatively easy. However, the dispersed and highly idiosyncratic decision-making process in foreign language instruction and the relatively low degree of consensus on curricula and teaching styles make it inevita-

ble that there will be problems of articulation. The most difficult transition point is between high school and college, where major intellectual and pedagogical differences divide the two levels of language instruction. In fact, it is a common experience for students having taken one or two years of language instruction in high school to be placed back in beginning classes in college. At the low end of the system, the goals and teaching styles of elementary school language instruction are currently the subject of very intense debate. Middle school language instruction floats unanchored somewhere in between. And the progress of the increasing number of students who work their way through these various levels is as yet uncharted. To the extent that there is any tradition stitching together the various levels of the language educational system, it is the textbooks, but they are numerous, subject to rapid obsolescence, and primarily aimed at specific educational levels.

In such a system of carefully partitioned layers, it is easy to lose sight of students' needs for consistent, cumulative skill acquisition. What is clearly needed is an individual-student-based system of tracking, setting sequenced goals and providing telescoped teaching materials that can overcome the discontinuities inherent in the current system.

Policy initiatives. Attempts to require the exposure of more and more students to foreign language study has been one of the principal goals of the foreign language teaching community. In higher education it takes the form of continuing hand-to-hand combat in one department, school, or institution at a time. Increasing student exposure to foreign language instruction has only occasionally been the subject of planning by the federal government. For instance, Senator Paul Simon has in the past proposed financial inducements for both higher education institutions and secondary schools to increase foreign language enrollments.

The major governmental initiatives on this issue have been taken at the state level, in the form of either high school graduation requirements, particularly for college-bound students, as in the case of Georgia, or requirements for admission to state-supported institutions of higher education, as in California. Currently only New York and the District of Columbia require language study of all high school students, while eighteen other states have a foreign language requirement that applies to some students. Indeed, four states now have language requirements for elementary school. Almost all of these state-level requirements have been introduced within the last decade.

The results of these efforts have been positive, but marginal, in increasing the number and proportion of students who take foreign language courses. The proportion of all high school students enrolled in language classes went from 32 percent in 1985 to 38 percent in 1990. College-level enrollments increased by 18 percent between 1986 and 1990, but a substantial portion of that increase took place at the two-year-college level, where language instruction was being introduced for the first time.

To my knowledge, no one is addressing the issue of raising the amount of foreign language training that students who enroll in foreign language courses actually receive. The purpose of almost all of the policy initiatives is the single-minded goal of expanding the number who receive any exposure at all. One would think that at least as much policy attention would be given to the question of how much foreign language education is enough for particular kinds of learners. Indeed, at some point a choice will have to be made between putting more national resources into providing a little bit of language instruction to as many students as possible, and directing some of those resources to lengthening the period of study for some students so that they can acquire a meaningful level of competency. Such a policy discussion has not even begun.

Problems of articulation are now catching the attention of federal policymakers. Since federal education agencies tend to be stratified by level of education themselves—in particular, they tend to specialize in higher versus secondary and primary education—it is difficult for individual agencies to span the different educational levels in addressing the issues of articulation. Similarly, state governments tend to regulate primary and secondary education closely and to step very lightly in dictating change in higher education. However, in the past few years several of the federal funding agencies—the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), the Fund for the Improvement and Reform of Schools and Teaching (FIRST), and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH)—have formed a loose coalition to address problems of articulation. Their intervention strategy is reactive—that is, as in most federal programs, calling for grant applications for pilot demonstration projects. As in many such interventions, pilot projects make only limited contributions to changing the system as a whole. Only determined and long-term policy intervention by state governments and consortia of higher education institutions is likely to make any substantial impact on problems of articulation.

The Assessment of Results

One of the most pressing needs of foreign language instruction in the United States is the development of consistent measures to assess student progress, to provide information that will facilitate the learning process, and to certify achievements and levels of competency at the end of each training level.

Foreign language testing. In Europe, foreign language testing is often the responsibility of a freestanding organization of the central government that sets and administers examinations and establishes standards for successful completion. In addition, there is usually an equivalent organization that develops curricula. One of the hallmarks of language instruction in many European countries is the overt link between uniform curricula and tests of student performance, both centrally administered. While there has been some concern about the backlash effect of uniform testing—that is, that classroom teaching may be bent toward achieving high ranking on the test—language tests themselves are not subject to major legitimacy battles as they are in the United States. Indeed, foreign language reform movements in Europe are largely about curriculum and pedagogical style, while in the United States the dominant reform movement has been centered on testing strategy. Moreover, the American testing movement is moving in a direction opposite to the situation found in the Netherlands and in much of Europe. We have been seeking to establish criteria for tests of language proficiency that are independent of curricular content and teaching style, although in recent years there has been some backing away from this ideology of isolation. One of the paradoxes of the American situation is that the movement to induce universal adoption of uniform proficiency standards is severely handicapped by the disaggregated nature of decision making in foreign language education. It is also curious that in other parts of American education, particularly in mathematics and the natural sciences, there are strong forces moving toward the kind of national testing procedures and standards found in Europe. In the United States, however, the foreign language profession is almost totally unconnected to such developments.

This is a propitious time to develop national assessment tools for foreign language learning. There is currently widespread acceptance of the importance of standardized student outcome measures as a tool for monitoring and improving foreign language instruction. The past decade has seen the dissemination of a particular rating scheme and testing style,

the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages/Interagency Language Roundtable (ACTFL/ILR) scale and the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI). The battle to achieve legitimacy for these techniques has been largely won. However, there is a growing debate about the appropriateness of this scale and associated testing style for school classrooms, drawn as the scale and tests are from governmental language schools that train adults in an intensive format for occupational use of the language. Moreover, the expansion in the number of learners to be tested has put considerable strain on a system developed to test a few learners at a time in an interactive format in a carefully controlled learning environment. Experience in the widespread use of those tests has raised questions about their suitability for mass administration, the standardization of raters' judgment, and the proper use of test results. As a result, the field of language studies, including the sponsors of the ACTFL/ILR standards, is ready for a reconsideration of what the nature of a national assessment strategy for foreign languages should be.

There is a growing interest in increasing the variety of tests available for the very different purposes for which the tests are given. In addition to providing an overall assessment of the level of proficiency at the end of training, tests should provide feedback to improve both the student's learning and the quality of instruction. In addition, some tests should measure the learner's capacity to perform specific tasks or should provide a diagnosis of achievements and errors to help both students and teachers improve the learning process.

Policy initiatives. The history of public policy with respect to language testing is a curious one. On the one hand, few of the federal funding programs have provided funds for the development of language tests. Yet the particular style of language testing that has gained widespread adoption in many parts of the educational system was originally developed for use in the federal government's foreign language schools—originally the Foreign Service Institute and later the Defense Department and other agencies, all gathered into an organization called the Federal Interagency Language Roundtable. On the academic side, one of the major teachers' associations, the ACTFL, collaborated with the federal agencies in adapting the government's scale for academic use. Out of this collaboration came a testing method, the OPI, and a set of rating criteria called the ACTFL/ILR standards. Subsequently, various parts of the federal government have urged that the academic community adopt this testing style and rating format. There was even a suggestion that the various govern-

mental agencies formally notify universities that only students certified in terms of that test would be employed. Title VI itself never required the use of the OPI or the proficiency guidelines. What it called for was the use of "proficiency-based" assessments, intended by the authors of the legislation to mean "performance-based" or "competency-based" assessments, although legislators could hardly be expected to be privy to the rancorous debates within the field as to what these various terms mean. A number of the administrators of Title VI, however, did and still do consider the OPI procedures and the proficiency guidelines, drawn as they are from the experience of the governmental language schools, as the prototypes toward which academic language instruction should be moving. Nonetheless, the use of the term *proficiency* led to some misinterpretation of the legislation, and the wording of the act was later changed to reflect this fact.

Over the past decade the use of the OPI and the ACTFL/ILR standards has spread to a surprising extent among language programs throughout the country. Moreover, these tests and standards have begun to show up in state-level language policy. For instance, the state of Texas uses them to certify its language teachers, and the state of New York has used them to revamp the goals of its foreign language system. More recently, there has been a bit of a backlash as the suitability of this single testing strategy for meeting the varied needs of assessment is being questioned.

However, the case of the ACTFL/ILR guidelines represents an unusual form of governmental intervention in the American foreign language educational system. It is based neither on the project-funding model of most federal programs nor on the official-mandate model of most state interventions. Perhaps one reason for its success is that the use of the OPI test coincided with a movement among language teachers to shift to a more "communicative" approach with an emphasis on oral interaction, which the ACTFL/ILR standards purported to measure. As a natural case study in policy intervention strategies in the American foreign language educational settings, it is of great interest.

I have chosen to address here only a few major issues to illustrate the nature of American public policy formulation with respect to foreign languages. Many more topics could be discussed: teacher recruitment and training; occupationally oriented language teaching; distance learning;

the role of high technology; adult language upgrading and reinforcement; foreign study; increasing the quality of instruction; maintaining a planning and implementation superstructure; and encouraging innovation and making it cumulative. These topics and others will be dealt with at length in the National Foreign Language Center's policy seminars. In all these areas, rationalized, central decision making is unusual. Ad hoc policymaking at the local or state level is much more common. It is time we decided how best to address foreign language educational issues in a more orderly fashion, keeping in mind the peculiarities and strengths of the American educational system.

Notes

1. This contrast between European and American language planning is dramatized in Richard D. Lambert, *Implications of the New Dutch National Action Plan for American Foreign Language Policy*, NFLC Position Paper, June 1991.

2. For a general outline of the American system, see Richard D. Lambert, *The National Foreign Language System*, NFLC Occasional Paper, June 1989.

3. For the detailed analysis of federal funding programs and state initiatives with respect to foreign language education, I am indebted to Jamie Draper of the National Foreign Language Center staff.

4. For a history of this legislation, see Richard D. Lambert, *History and Future of HEA Title VI*, NFLC Position Paper, October 1991.

5. See Richard D. Lambert, *International Studies and the Undergraduate* (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1989), pp. 62–63.

About the National Foreign Language Center

The National Foreign Language Center, a nonprofit organization established within the Johns Hopkins University in 1987 with support from major private foundations, is dedicated to improving the foreign language competency of Americans. The NFLC emphasizes the formulation of public policy to make our language teaching systems responsive to national needs. Its primary tools in carrying out this objective are:

- *Surveys.* The NFLC conducts surveys to collect previously unavailable information on issues concerning national strength and productivity in foreign language instruction, and our foreign language needs in the service of the economic, diplomatic, and security interests of the nation.

- *National policy planning groups.* In order to address major foreign language policy issues, the NFLC convenes national planning groups that bring together users of foreign language services and representatives of the language instructional delivery systems in formal education, the government, and the for-profit sector.

- *Research.* The NFLC conducts research on innovative, primarily individual-oriented strategies of language learning to meet the nation's foreign language needs of the future.

In addition, the NFLC maintains an Institute of Advanced Studies where individual scholars work on projects of their own choosing.

The results of these surveys, discussions, and research are made available through the NFLC's publications, such as these Occasional Papers, and they form the basis of fresh policy recommendations addressed to national leaders and decision makers.

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